

# **Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats (1795-1821)**

The following e content is based on the Romantic poet John Keats' famous ode, Ode to a Nightingale. The content explores the themes, style, poetical devices, structure of the poem and an analysis of the poem.

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## **Ode to a Nightingale - John Keats (1795-1821)**

The poet-

Keats was born in London. He developed poetic taste at a very early age. He had keen interest in Greek mythology. At the age of 15 he was orphaned and was taken as an apprentice by a surgeon and began the study of anatomy and physiology but soon he abandoned the medical field and turned towards poetry where his mind always was.

John Keats belongs to the second generation of romantic poets along with Byron and Shelley. He met Leigh Hunt, the editor of the 'Examiner' a leading magazine who became his friend and helped him publish his sonnets. The first volume of Keats' poems was published in 1817. Keats had a very tragic life; his mother died of tuberculosis when he was a little boy and later his brother also succumbed to tuberculosis in his youth. He wrote 'Endymion' which narrates a Greek legend, and this work was savagely attacked by critics. Keats fell in love with Fanny Brawne but this love relationship did not materialize and brought him great disappointment and despair. These were enough reasons to influence Keats drastically in his life. It is unfortunate that a poet like Keats died at the very early age of 25 as he suffered from tuberculosis like his mother and brother, he died in Rome in the year 1821 where he had gone with his friend the painter Joseph Severn who tended him till the last. A few weeks after Keats' death, Shelley wrote 'Adonais' which is an elegy on Keats.

Some notable works of Keats are as follows-

John Keats wrote sonnets, odes and epics. On First Looking into Chapman's Homer, "Lamia," "The Eve of St. Agnes," the great odes ("On Indolence," "On a Grecian Urn," "To Psyche," "To a Nightingale," "On Melancholy," and "To Autumn"), and the two unfinished versions of an epic on Hyperion, etc.

The style of Keats' poetry-

Keats stands out from the Romantics because of his poetic craft of impacting the senses with rich, luxurious, vivid and vibrant imagery. He is the poet of sensuousness. He has a magical power to transcend into the imaginary making it real and beautiful. Keats takes us through his verses into the realm of the idealist state of beauty, the beauty that the senses can perceive. He

has exemplary craftsmanship in choosing adapting and coining words and phrases to meet the demands of his poetic flights. His negative sensibility a term that Keats coined where an artist is “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” is explicitly seen in his poems.

Themes in Keats’ poetry-

- Keats emphasizes through his work, the beautiful and sublime world of the senses.
- He speaks of the transience of life, beauty and even love.
- He finds that only art is permanent and fulfilling.
- He ponders on the reality and illusion.
- He sings of death and immortality.
- Joy and melancholy is visible in his verses.
- Dream and reality are present in his poems.

The Poem –

Ode-

A lyrical poem that celebrates an event or an individual and goes on to praise and glorify it. The ode was propounded by the Grecian poet Pindar and the classical ode is divided into 3 parts; the strophe, the antistrophe and the epode. There are 3 types of ode: the Pindaric ode, the Horatian Ode and the irregular ode. It uses heightened imagination and is exalted in style.

Theme of the poem-

The poem was written in May 1819 at Wentworth, Hamstead where there was a garden where a nightingale usually visited.

The poem reverberates with themes of intoxication, consciousness and isolation. The poet speaks of the transience of beauty, love and life and finds the song of the nightingale to be permanent and eternal. For the poet the human life is so full of sorrows and struggles and wishes to fly away with the nightingale on the wings of imagination through poetry, and transcend beyond the earthly existence. There is an escapist strain in the poem till the last stanza where the poet finally finds himself in a vulnerable human state of painful human existence.

In the first stanza the poet wishes to be intoxicated so that he may be able to forget his life and the struggles and the despair of human existence and he wishes to escape into the world of the nightingale’s song.

In the second stanza the poet gives us beautiful imagery and Keats’ sensuousness is seen when he describes a bottle of wine and the purple stained mouth. In this stanza the poet wishes to escape from the world along with the nightingale into the forest. The nightingale’s song transports the poet into a different world.

In the third stanza the theme of the poem stands out where the poet feels that the world has pain and sorrow, suffering and despair and death. Beauty, youth, and love are all transient in nature, the impermanence of life is brought out in these lines .

In the fourth stanza the poet wishes to fly away to the nightingale. The poet is with the bird in his imagination and on the wings of his verse, he has transcended to another realm. There is a visual treat to the sense of sight with images of the Moon, the stars and the dark forest beneath.

In stanza five, Keats' sensuousness is at its peak, the sense of smell is activated and a vivid imagery of the flowers is presented. Keats is able to guess according to the season which flowers may have been growing in the forest as visibility is nil as it is dark and stirs the auditory sense the imagery of the flowers to be the murmurous haunt of flies.

Keats has spoken about death in his poems and in this sixth stanza he has talked about death and wishes to die at the moment as it is the most apt time since he is in a state of heightened ecstasy by the nightingale's song, The pain that death brings along with it will not be experienced by the poet as he is in perfect joy. The song of the nightingale has put the poet in a state of physical unconsciousness where he is numb to pain and suffering.

In the second last stanza Keats speaks about the immortality of the nightingale. He feels that the bird's song has been there from ancient times and has touched the hearts of many grieving humans. There is a biblical allusion of the story of Ruth from the Old Testament.

In the final stanza Keats wakes up from this flight of imagination and descends back into the realm of human existence, the truth of his reality, the realization of his self and human existence makes him sad and sorrowful again. He questions himself, whether he was in a dream, a stupor or was this merely playful imagination.

The poet is conscious to the sufferings of the human lot, the transience of joy that the poet experienced a short while ago.

Ode to a Nightingale talks about the temporariness of joy, of life, of youth and of beauty.

Structure of the poem-

The poem has been divided into 8 stanzas of 10 lines each and the rhyme scheme of the poem is a b a b c d e c d e. The poet has made use of many figures of speech such as alliteration, personification, simile, apostrophe, onomatopoeia and allusions. It is needless to say that there is an exuberance of imagery touching the sense of sight, the sense of taste of and the auditory senses. The poem is a beautiful expression of the felicity of Keats' expression, imagination and sensuousness.

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